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SOME CHANGES IN THE SUMMER BIRD LIFE AT DELAVAN, WISCONSIN

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A recent three weeks' visit to Delavan, Wisconsin, from July 7 to 26, 1919, gave me the first opportunity in many years to compare the summer bird life of today in my home county with that of twenty to thirty years ago. From boyhood I had closely observed the birds in this region, and my first journal begins in 1888. From 1891 until 1902 I was especially active as a collector of birds and was almost daily in the field. I left Wisconsin early in 1902 and except for a brief visit in the summer of 1907, with no opportunity for the observation of birds, my occasional trips to Delavan have been at some other time than the breeding season.

Delavan is in southeastern Wisconsin, in a beautiful country of varied physiography, with abundant streams and lakes, forests, prairies, marshes, and farmland. It has always been a most favorable region for bird life.

My first impression, on this recent visit, was that birds were more abundant than at the time of my main ornithological activity in Wisconsin, and the three weeks of excursions afield convinced me that this is true. Several species, as summer residents, are conspicuously more abundant now, and many others have held their own in numbers. A few, on the other hand, have almost or completely disappeared from the region.

One of the most notable cases of increase is that of the

house wren. I had never been able to obtain a breeding bird of this species although two forms, *Troglodytes aëdon aëdon* and *T. a. parkmani* (or, as we called it then, *aztecus*), were common during migrations. House wrens were reported by ornithologists as breeding now and then in other portions of the state and some few may have been present in my region, but as a summer resident the bird was certainly rare in the vicinity of Delavan. Now I found it, in July, one of the most conspicuous and generally distributed of town birds. It rivals the martin in popularity and everywhere I went were wren houses occupied by busy, singing wrens. Such favorites indeed are the birds that I should hesitate to be the collector of the desired series of breeding examples for subspecific determination. I suspect that both *aëdon* and *parkmani* will now be found nesting within the state.

Purple martins have also increased in numbers. Martin houses are much more common than formerly, and no one seems to have trouble in obtaining the desired tenants. Sentiment in a bird's favor is the greatest help in its survival and increase in settled communities.

The crested flycatcher has certainly greatly increased in numbers as a breeding bird. In my collecting days at Delavan I had to go to certain unfrequented woods to find the great-crest, but now it is much more common; I saw it often in places it never used to inhabit, and it has actually become a town bird. I also saw the wood pewee feeding young in a nest on an oak limb over our own house, near the city street; something I should have been much surprised to note twenty years ago. Though always abundant in that vicinity, the pewee was never suspected of being a city dweller. Both the red-headed woodpecker and the yellow-billed cuckoo are much more abundant and generally distributed than formerly, although both were common summer birds in my collecting days in Wisconsin. They are now city birds also, and the red-head seemed one of the most conspicuous birds of the country roadside.

The effects of spring protection for waterfowl are especially noticeable; more ducks breed about Delavan than at any time since I can remember; and if they continue to increase the numbers of young birds must soon approach in some measure those of the still earlier days before the ducks were forced by an army of spring shooters to desert their old breeding grounds. In my shooting days at Delavan we killed almost entirely wood ducks on the opening of the season (August 20, or later on September 1), and individuals of other species before the first fall migration had commenced were comparatively rare. Some years there was a fair sprinkling of blue-winged teals, or an occasional mallard, gadwall, or other river duck. Now the mallard and blue-winged teal are the most common breeding species; black ducks are fairly so; and, most unexpectedly, I find that pintails now regularly nest. Last year (1918) fully fifty pintails were reared in one large marshy pond not over seven miles from Delavan, where the flocks of young birds were seen by sportsmen friends of mine before the shooting season opened. About five hundred ducks, mostly mallards, teals, wood ducks, and pintails were, I was told, found in this one pond on the opening day, September 16, 1918. Baldpates and pintails are of late years frequently found in the bags on the first day's shooting, and although there is no direct evidence that the baldpate nests, it is hardly likely that any extensive migration has taken place at that early date.

The robin, wood thrush, catbird, song sparrow, and kingbird are certainly as abundant as they were twenty-five years ago, and I feel almost sure that they have actually increased in numbers since that time. The black tern is still a most fimiliar bird in suitable localities and seems fully as abundant as formerly. As many as fifty terns were seen in one flock, the adults and young congregated on the muddy shore and a nearby fence. At each of the old ponds and marshes that I vistied during my stay I saw numbers of them gracefully hunting for insects low over the water

and flags. The mourning dove and prairie chicken, both supposed to enjoy full protection, are not recuperating as they should under favorable conditions. The prairie chicken is no doubt kept from actual increase only by the illegal shooting of a few poachers and would, if the laws for its protection were rigidly enforced, become a much more common and generally distributed bird. Of course those now to be found are but a mere fraction of what were here at one time, but I do not think the prairie chicken has much decreased in numbers, locally, during the past twenty years. Its plentifulness in any given year is in a great measure dependent on the weather conditions at nesting time.

Among the more familiar of the smaller birds that seem to me to have been distinctly reduced in numbers are the bluebird, brown thrasher, barn swallow, cliff swallow, and chipping sparrow. The dickcissel was certainly not as abundant as I have seen it, but this species was always subject to a considerable variation in numbers from year to year.

There are, I think, fewer crows than at one time. The mania for crow shooting, fostered for commercial reasons by a great powder company, has swept this country as well as other states and it is no uncommon thing to find several dead crows under a single tree. It appears to me that the pernicious practice of summer crow shooting is bound to have a direct detrimental influence on the other breeding birds, game birds as well as beneficial hawks and owls, the herons and all other conspicuous bird targets. It is a very bad policy indeed to encourage an army of boys and irresponsible men to roam the country with guns throughout the entire spring and summer. It is not human nature for them to confine their shooting to the crow alone; harmless or valuable birds are killed and breeding game birds, if not actually slaughtered, are much disturbed. Even were it proved that the crow is a distinct menance to the game and

other birds, they will suffer vastly more from this promiscuous summer hunting than from the crow itself.

All breeding hawks are distinctly reduced in numbers. I saw, during the three weeks, only one marsh hawk and one Cooper's hawk. The marsh hawk formerly was really common and the red-tail was a regular breeder in considerable numbers. The summer crow shooters are, I think, largely to blame for this disgraceful extermination of breeding hawks. The nighthawk, pied-billed grebe, and wood duck are less in numbers than formerly; of the first two I happened to see only a single example of each. Wood ducks are still much commoner as nesting birds than in most parts of the range of the species, but are not so plentiful as they were twenty or more years ago.

I saw no Forster's terns nor upland plovers whatever; they seem to have completely disappeared from their old breeding haunts; and saddest of all the ruffed grouse has gone—I interviewed many hunters and others and could not find a single person who has seen one in five or six years. Some few are doubtfully reported in the extreme northern part of the county but the woods about Delavan where the grouse was formerly plentiful are absolutely barren of this glorious bird. The grouse was not exterminated by shooters; I think the pasturing of the wood lots and the ever present house cat are chiefly to blame. The Hungarian partridge, a poor substitute indeed, has been introduced, is locally common just north of us, and may eventually take the place of the native bird.

Altogether, during the three weeks' visit, I saw sixty-eight species of breeding birds, but as I made no special effort to search out certain kinds the list is much smaller than it might have been. The immense weed, grass, and fern grown marsh or low-land prairie, which has been the breeding grounds for Henslow's sparrows and short-billed marsh wrens since long, long before my time, is being slowly reclaimed. The cornfields and pastures are eating into it on all sides, and will, before many years, meet in its

very center. I have never found a single example of either of these birds in any other locality in this region during the breeding season. What will become of them, as well as the hordes of bobolinks, the marsh hawks, the prairie hens, and other characteristic nesting birds, when the last acre of virgin sod is ploughed for corn? The sandhill cranes, which still frequent this marsh in the spring and fall, deserted it for the breeding season many years ago. The last record of a crane's nest here that can be considered authentic was in 1883. The other birds, less alarmed by settlement but requiring these exact conditions, must soon look elsewhere for breeding grounds. And with the marsh and the birds, will disappear, locally, the Blanding's turtle, the last massasauga, the pitcher plant, rare orchids, and a generally peculiar native fauna and flora not otherwise represented in this immediate region.

Extreme abundance of a certain few birds during the nesting season will be poor compensation for the loss of others. Personally, I prefer to see a goodly number of species on a day's excursion rather than hundreds of robins, martins, wrens and other familiar birds. But those species that are able to adapt themselves to changed conditions are the ones that may and do increase. In southern Wisconsin, as in some other parts of the world, they will, I believe, grow more and more abundant; while many of the more interesting and beautiful forms of bird life must become rarer and more restricted, until they cease to nest at all, as the conditions necessary to their very existence are swept away. A number of nesting birds have been exterminated in southern Wisconsin since the settlement of the country. We can not help but wonder which species will be the next to go. The ruffed grouse, the Forster's tern, and the upland plover were depleted in numbers at Delavan, but no one, twenty years ago, would have predicted their complete disappearance from this region within so short a time.